

Household instruments are cleaned to become the 'kitchen ikons' in this domestic hell where religious acts are confused with daily rituals. The man gains in stature by his denial of the woman's needs, 'proving himself, murdering her, inch by inch'.

The range of Mitcalfe's poetry is wide. He often lapses into sentimental praise of the countryside only to surprise us with a twist of phrase that reveals a much deeper sense of reality. Sometimes his speech is pedantic and predictable, or derivative of other poets, for example 'First Anniversary' where the imagery of Prufrock eclipses his theme. Yet there is often the delicacy and sensitivity of his childhood image of a fantail 'fluttering/on the edge of consciousness'. Mitcalfe's output includes over a dozen books: poetry, short stories, children's stories, work on writing, and an historical novel. His diversity and the unevenness of his work may well account for the relative lack of critical acclaim awarded him in any one genre.

JOOST DAALDER

R. A. K. Mason and the Passing of Time

R. A. K. Mason (1905-71) is a hauntingly impressive poet who not only shows himself acutely aware of where he is as someone who 'Burnt Dian's temple down at Otahuhu' (with an imagination reaching beyond a geographical presence which is nevertheless intensely felt,¹) but who also has what amounts to a profoundly interesting obsession with the relationship between the present on the one hand, and the past or the future on the other. In the present essay I wish to examine the various ways in which this obsession manifests itself as something ultimately Romantic and modern rather than, say, Christian as that word might have been understood in, for example, the Renaissance.

Mason appears to present what may appear to be his

poetically 'official' theological-philosophical position in a poem like 'The Agnostic' (p. 26 of the *Collected Poems*), the title of which is significant and which proclaims uncertainty about 'what's truth what's right what's wrong'. To a considerable extent, the poems do bear witness to such uncertainty, for example 'Stoic Marching Song' (p. 54) :

Though my soul is not to save
boldly march I to my grave
through this hostile country here
prey of doubt and pain and fear:

Son of sorrow sire of sods
still I gird back at the gods,
boldly bear five feet eleven
despite hell and earth and heaven.

The first stanza, speaking of a soul which is 'not to save', seems to commit itself to an answer inconsistent with the label 'agnostic': if one claims that the soul will *not* be saved, one cannot call oneself someone who does not know whether it *might* be. The belief that the soul will not exist beyond death can hardly be easily reconciled to a belief in God, and therefore implies an answer (a negative one) to the question whether or not God exists. In fact, however, Mason does show himself uncertain, for the pride of the second stanza not only is directed against 'the gods', but also, more tellingly, is said to exist 'despite hell and earth and heaven'. It is possible, of course, that we are to impute to others, not to Mason, the notion that such things as hell and heaven exist — but the poet does not say so, and it is quite conceivable that at this point he is admitting, after all, that the soul might go, for example, to heaven, in which case it surely *will* be saved. I think the ambiguity in the poem's stance is almost certainly, in this excellent poet, the result of a deliberate, calculated intention rather than muddled confusion.

In any case, such a lack of conviction about a metaphysical framework in which a Divinity punishes or rewards the soul after death inevitably, as with most modern writers who are in this position, leads to, or at least is strongly concomitant with, anxiety about time. The Christian may have his eye on eternity, or the atheist on the here and now (because a future beyond death is not believed in) :

the agnostic reckons with the possibility that there is an after-life, or that there is not, and the burden of his suffering may well be correspondingly increased. It is exactly, I believe, because of his awareness of both possibilities that Mason describes himself in the first stanza as 'prey of doubt and pain and fear'.

Or is the doubt not quite that of the agnostic? Perhaps, rather, the feeling is the more typically modern one of someone who attempts to live in the present, without God 'and hell . . . and heaven', but discovers that this does not work, because 'earth' does not offer happiness either? That may be a more precise interpretation of the last line of the poem, and I think that we shall find it more meaningful to interpret the word 'agnostic' in Mason in this way. The poems are primarily man-centred. It is for this reason, viz. that the present of a divine power is not strongly felt, that in for instance 'Evolution' (p. 55) Mason speaks, as in the 'Stoic Marching Song', of 'gods' rather than God. At the same time, 'God' (singular and with capital G) is a word having lost much of its force and used with rather ironic awareness of the meaning it once had but no longer, in both 'Evolution':

. . . why were we sent
for God knows what experiment
of breeding men as men breed mice
for scientific sacrifice?

and The Spark's Farewell to Its Clay' (p. 38) :

. . . at last of this our life
you surely have gained blank earth walls
my friend
and I? God only knows what I have gained.

There appears to be some awareness, here, that the soul ('I') is not likely to have gained much without 'God', even if the Divinity is hardly *vibrantly alive* to the poet. And here we also come to the Romantic element that I referred to before: there may be sceptical doubt, probably 'rational', about what the future may hold for the soul, or whether there is a God, but obviously a place in heaven, and one assumes the existence of God, is very much longed for. To call such longing 'Romantic' is not to suggest, of

course, that Christianity is necessarily Romantic, but that someone *is*, if he would like it to be true while very much doubting its reality. In Mason's case, we see some wistful looking back at the values Christianity was once supposed to hold, and there is a painful realization that the language now hardly allows one to use the word 'God' without one's implicitly pointing also at the fact that for most He survives only in expressions very worn and employed almost automatically.

For this modern soul, it would not be enough if the 'clay' has indeed 'gained blank earth walls', because a physical here-and-now life will not suffice for the 'spark'. It is in this context that we must view the poet's pre-occupation with past and future values.

Mason is a sombre Romantic who looks back into the past rather than into the future, and in this respect belongs with, for example, T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats rather than a visionary of the millennium like Shelley.² Indeed, his few excursions into what the future may hold remind one of the un-Shelleyan Blake:

. . . children will dance through our land

Children of brain and of body
will link hands and laugh through our land
making green their feet.. .

(Here are the children. . p. 97)

Despite the joyfulness of the tone here, Mason's religious inclinations are predominantly man-centred as in Blake's case, with deep awe for Christ as man rather than for something as abstract as Shelley's 'One', and for him the distance of 'heaven' is evidently such that a bright future is not normally entertained. It may be that someone roughly of Eliot's and Yeats's generation was hardly able to view the future with such confidence as was still possible, perhaps, in the early nineteenth century, though Shelley was unusual even then. At all events, the future in Mason's eyes, like the present, does not seem generally cheerful.

This is not to say that it does not intensely concern him, and no essay on the passing of time in Mason can ignore this element.

The future almost invariably is seen as death rather than life. The knowledge that in a sense, at least, life

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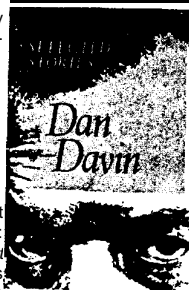
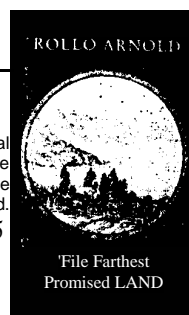
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will come to an end at death haunts poem after poem, and is one of the most striking ways in which this poet shows himself aware of the passing of time. No doubt Mason's feeling that he was, like Christ, victimized in his own country³ is in part the cause for this insistent dwelling on man's mortality, but there are several poems which appear to be more obsessed with the phenomenon of death as such than with any particular form of it. Characteristically, there is a marked inclination to believe that man is dust and returns to dust, with nothing remaining — thus, for example, in 'A Doubt' (p. 49), in which the doubt is whether

... youth knows or learns
that man the clay
to clay returns.

There is, evidently, *no* doubt in Mason's mind here *that man* is clay and returns to clay; perhaps he *is* placed in the temporary possession of a 'spark' during his earthly abode, but even that possibility is not mentioned.

Another curious possibility seems to be envisaged in 'After Death' (p. 27), from which I quote the first stanza:

And there will be just as rich fruits to cull
and jewels to see
nor shall the moon nor the sun be any more dull
and there will be flowers as fine to pull
and the rain will be as beautiful
but not for me.

This poem does not commit itself to the position that after death there will be dust, and only that. Rather, it calls up a picture of some region — presumably a heaven which is a mirror of what is physically most enjoyable on this earth — not accessible to the poet. Since the after-life is, for others, a continuation of happiness, the implication is that for the poet it will be prolonged suffering. This, in turn, leads to the view that if there is an after-life, it is no more purposeful than the present life. The very sameness of this existence and life after death is a depressing phenomenon to Mason, because it means that there is no escaping into either a different present or a different future.

In passing, we must note that contemplation of the future,

of time eternity and of those laws
I feel but cannot know and of some place
beyond this and of any primal cause,
(*Miracle of Life*, III, p. 34)

does indeed lead Mason to even more painful awareness of the present. Thinking of the future, God, etc. prompts in him a wish to be 'thoughtless a merciful space', but he soon finds that

to cry 'forget' serves only to remind.

Contemplation of the future is, therefore, painful not only because of what one is likely to feel about that, but also about the present. The two are of course connected in that thinking of a future of suffering makes one suffer in the present.

Does the future not hold any other promises? A Renaissance poet like Shakespeare in the *Sonnets* is aware of ways to combat the ravages of time, and it can be no coincidence that Mason turned to these poems both for help and to show that his own position, *through time*, was different, and more despairing than Shakespeare's. In 'Flattering Uction' (p. 61), the tone (and the language) is very Shakespearean, with its bold declaration of art's power to outlast time and thus to establish eternity:

Then I recall how my eternal fame
stands up too strong for Time to overthrow
and shall stand straight when all their pride is
shame
and all their clay corruption long ago:

When all their glory's wind in lamentation
moaning the world round for remembrance
I shall be known to many a mighty nation
my flags shall forward with each year's advance.

One difference with Shakespeare is that the older poet is more anxious about the survival beyond death of his friend than about his own immortality; even Mason's pre-occupation with the self may strike us as more Romantic. Still, in the case of this poem one is perhaps struck by similarity rather than dissimilarity with Shakespeare. Elsewhere, we are confronted with the poet's realization that

he belongs, *in his time* (and place) , to 'The Lesser Stars' (p. 30):

We are they who are doomed to raise up no monuments to
outlast brass:
for even as quickly as our bodies' passing hence
our work shall pass.

Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, however, assert the strength of 'black ink' over a 'mortality' against which 'brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea' can hold out.⁴ And of course we are in particular also meant to recall Sonnet 55:

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents Than
unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time.
(1-4)

While Shakespeare claims (7-8) ,

Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory,
Mason feels that

of us shall be no more memory left to any sense
than dew leaves upon the grass.
It is, implicitly, acknowledged that the art of the past does have eternity, while Mason's own (or thus he claims to feel) has not. Some critics might consider such a stance 'realistic', but in truth its idealization of some time different from the present is typically Romantic, and, one might add, modern.
I do not mean any disapproval: on the contrary, I feel considerable sympathy for this or any poet who shows some sense of relativity when considering his own performance against a tradition whose weight is understood. My point is, however, that in Mason's case as in T. S. Eliot's the inclination to be derogatory about the present and full of awe for the past is ultimately a matter of feeling rather than observed fact: to such poets, the past assumes mythical qualities. They are, of course, acutely aware of the persistent power, not only of a past which itself tends to be seen

in imaginative terms, but also of traditional myths as such. One of the reasons why Mason's verse has a timeless quality about it is that stylistically it has a marked 'classical' air; this is not a matter of myth, as a rule, but the matter is related in that the poet appears to rely on a past that has lasted and that appears to be more vital, too, than the present. And Mason does use the civilization of Greece and Rome and its myths in non-linguistic ways, as for example in 'Herostratus at Ephesus' (p. 39), which presents an 'outcast' similar to Christ though rather more conspicuously a 'fool', who 'alone inherits immortality'. Mason, in this poem and elsewhere, objects to the 'ephemeral ones', who, in Herostratus' case as no doubt in his own, 'spit at me scorn me spurn me strike me down'. The point is that it is such a seemingly foolish man who, uniquely, enjoys 'deathless fame', because things are not what they seem to the merely superficial mind: just as such a person alone inherits immortality, so too are we made to feel that it is the past which alone is real and lasting, despite what as 'ephemeral ones' we might be inclined to think.

The presentation of Christ runs along somewhat similar lines in that he, too, is on the face of it a beggar, to be forgotten and ignored:

The cook peers out:

`oh curse that old lag
here again
with his clumsy swag
made of a dirty old
turnip bag.'

(On the Swag', p. 56)

— but in fact it is exactly this figure who, nevertheless, is present (here again') eternally, and about whom a more percipient voice says to the cook in answer:

'Bring him in cook

from the grey level sleet
put silk on his body
slippers on his feet,
give him fire
and bread and meat.

Let the fruit be plucked and
the cake be iced,

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the bed be snug
and the wine be spiced
in the old cove's night-cap:
for this is Christ.'

Christ is, deliberately, brought near to us as a very human figure, worth caring for in a physical and immediate way. It is the cook who is distant from us or meant to strike us as such; the values of the past are the ones close to our touch. This is also what Mason means when he says in 'Wayfarers' (p. 36): '... the fabrics of my dreams/ are less intangible to me than they' (i.e. people like the cook):

Ignorant that I have heard and seen Christ break
the bondage of his tongue-tied sightlessness
have walked with firm-faithed Mary to the stake
and kissed the hem of martyred Flora's dress

And I in Lichfield frequently have been
Chatterton's accessory in suicide
have Gaius Marius in Minturniae seen
for many hours by Waitemata's tide

Burnt Dian's temple down at Otahuhu
and slain Herostratus at Papatoe
and here in Penrose brought Aeneas through
to calm Ausonian lands from bloody Troy.

The poem is worth quoting not only because of its potent and admirable rhetoric, but also, in the present context, for the way in which it brings together the various aspects of the past that we have been considering: the Christian myth, the English literary past, the civilization and the imaginative stories of classical antiquity — all of which are juxtaposed to a remarkably, almost humorously, pedestrian present. Not least, the past appeals to this poet because it fascinates the imagination, and seemed to him obviously itself to have been characterized by a rich use of this faculty. Here, more than in visions of the future, could Mason apparently find some resting-place against the ravages of time.

I do not imply that all aspects of any past are accepted simply because the past is the past. Mason is not a thoughtless conservative. It is true that a comparison with the

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past teaches him about limitations or defects in the New Zealand of his day. But what he values in the past are things that have lasted exactly because they are valuable. In this respect, the passing of time has not only a bad effect, but a good one also. It does away with such matters as

. . . the pearled
proud vaulted halls where once old princes drank.
(*'Sonnets of the Ocean's Base' I*, p. 21)

By eliminating and destroying what rightly does not last and supporting what should, time (if one takes a long view) helps to establish eternity. This enables one to look at the momentary event or state of things with more detachment, as in the latter-Day Geography Lesson' (p. 40):

This, quoth the Eskimo master was
London in English times:
step out a little faster
you two young men at the last there
the Bridge would be on our right hand
and the Tower near where those crows stand --
we struck it you'll recall in Gray's rhymes:
this, quoth the Eskimo master
was London in English times.

The poem looks into the future, of course, but demonstrates how the present will in due course become a past without menace. At one time, thus the poem postulates, some English master spoke in just the same way, as a representative of a society which, hierarchically ordered and in military style, addressed boys as 'young men' who had to march briskly. Of the frightening Tower nothing remains but 'those crows'. The memory does last, but only through literature — though even that is in danger of being used in a utilitarian or cavalier manner, or at least will not resist such a manner if not strong enough in itself. (The mention of Gray, as opposed to for example Shakespeare, is probably significant.) The facts about the past are valuable to us, thus Mason implies, exactly because they show how an unsatisfactory present which resembles that past will likewise prove impermanent.

But, obviously, the past is nothing holy as such: the

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Eskimo master will remain as repulsive when *he* comes to form part of the past. And, if we are to extract value from the past, we must show more awareness than the speaker of 'Old Memories of Earth' (p. 28) :

I think I have no other home than this
I have forgotten much remember much
but I have never any memories such
as these make out they have of lands of bliss.

Probably, in view of Mason's attitudes elsewhere in the poetry, we are at least to some extent to agree with the speaker that it is not easy to remember having been in 'lands of bliss'. But the gloominess of the speaker is not to be confused with Mason's own: the question is not so much whether there have been happier times, but what one remembers. And in this respect surely Mason's own tone is generally far different from this Gerontion-like character (not imitated from Eliot, but resembling him just a little) , with his hesitant fourth stanza:

And I recall I think I can recall
back even past the time I started school
or went a-crusoeing in the corner pool
that I was present at a city's fall.

The fallen city is no doubt Troy, which hardly still lives in the present consciousness of most of us, but is vividly present to Mason himself, who

...here in Penrose brought Aeneas through
to calm Ausonian lands from bloody
Troy. (*'The Wayfarers'*, p. 36)

And the last two stanzas are even more revealing of the fact that the speaker is treated ironically:

And I am positive that yesterday
walking past One Tree Hill and quite alone
to me there came a fellow I have known
in some old times, but when I cannot say:

Though we must have been great friends, I and he,
otherwise I should not remember him
for everything of the old life seems dim
as last year's deeds recalled by friends to me.

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'One Tree Hill' is, of course, to be found in Auckland, but Mason here as elsewhere uses his art in such a way that his words do not refer to New Zealand alone: there can be no doubt that the 'fellow' so humbly presented is Christ, and that the speaker is right in remembering that he and Christ were once 'great friends'. Not only was Christ a friend to man, but, typically for Mason, the relation is reciprocal, one of genuine brotherhood, as is shown by the Speaker of 'On the Swag' (p. 56 and discussed above), who warmly looks after Christ, or a fellow-human that he perceives to be such (Christ, clearly, can exist in anyone at any time). That speaker, like Mason himself, is always acutely aware of the significance of Christ, and a marked contrast to the present speaker who virtually *despite himself* shows the strength of the past living on in the present.

However, Mason himself also suffered in his own country; to him, too, there was within it no consoling past to be found, and in bad moments he could write of himself as

an animal in lamentation
for the dead of a long-dead nation:
and in the macrocarpa trees
I heard the sighing of the seas
in some far ocean's centre moan
for strong men dead with seed unsown.

('Twenty-Sixth October', p. 92)

The poem was presumably written in World War II, and the 'dead' are no doubt victims of it. But the long-dead nation' with its 'macrocarpa trees' can only be New Zealand — the country of Otahuhu and Papatoe rather than Dian and Herostratus, to mention The Wayfarers' (p. 36) once again.

But the phrase 'strong men dead with seed unsown' has an even more personal implication. Shakespeare wanted his friend to marry, or at least to procreate, because that way the friend would live on and triumph over time. Mason is always more self-preoccupied, and the fact that he had no children haunts the protagonist of the poems regularly. Like Shakespeare, he connects art and offspring as means whereby life may be continued: in 'Here are the children' (p. 97) he offers his poems as his 'children', adding 'I have no child of the flesh'. While in this poem he foresees some revolution after which 'children will dance

through our land', he is generally more despondent about a new generation. Let us for example consider briefly 'The Young Man Thinks of Sons' (p. 60) :

Did my father curse his father for his lust I wonder
as I do mine
and my grand-dad curse his sire for his wickedness
his weakness
his blunder
and so on down the whole line

Well I'll stop the game break the thread end my race.. .

.....

I'll take care that the lust of my loins never bring to
fruition
the seed of a son
who in his nettle-grown kingdom should curse both my
sins of
commission
and what I left undone.

This, of course, does not regret the absence of children; on the contrary, a firm resolve is made never to create any. That by itself will mean that this possibility of continuation beyond the grave will be eliminated, and such despite the poet's acute awareness of 'the whole line', about which he also wrote the interesting 'Sonnet of My Everlasting Hand' (p. 48). The reasons for the refusal to have children are therefore the more revealing. This poet clearly feels a markedly puritanical distaste for 'lust', and is unable to see procreation as anything but the result of sin. There are, moreover, some other startling assumptions, such as the assertion that a son would face a life which is a 'nettle-grown kingdom'. It may be that Mason saw his own life as nettle-grown; the indications from his poetry are that he did. But one may perhaps complain of his supposing that for his son life would inevitably be the same. At any rate, even if one shares the poet's attitude, the fact remains that that attitude is singularly onesided. From the tone, one would however guess that Mason himself is to some extent aware of this and making a deliberately desperate assertion about what he will do, so that the reader may see the (healthier) alternative view

and action. On the other hand, even if sex is not seen as 'lust' or 'sin' throughout the volume, it is perhaps, for this poet, a means of temporary escape from the torments of life and time rather than, as for Shakespeare, procreation.

As such, it is evidently the source of very intense feeling, as in this poem or 'Lugete O Veneres' (p. 62), where Mason seems to show a mixture of attraction and withdrawal: the latter is shown not only in his attempt to detach himself from his longing for 'the girl on the next farm' by calling it a 'farce', but also in a less conspicuous but telling distaste for his own body, described as a 'naked corpse goose-fleshed', with an 'arm cold and mottled/ like a bar of blue soap'. The puritanism expresses itself, here, not so much in a contempt for the other sex, but in a loathing for the way one's own person is degraded by desire.

Still, whether wholly pleasant or not, the demands of the body can take one into a psychological state where time is no longer contemplated, as the poet indicates in 'Thigh to thigh' (p. 64). Failure to take advantage of this opportunity immediately takes one back into awareness of time and death: the 'cup' of sex is not drunk, here, and once the 'moment's gone',

... the rustling grass
breathes a dead mass and orison

And two night birds toll from a star-lit bough
dirge-voiced the waves roll
as though a soul were passing now.

The assertions about 'lust' seemed desperate, but no less the assertions in favour of sex: an excessive claim is made for its supposed power in that the passing of the soul here envisaged is, obviously, not truly dependent on sex taking place or not. Even if the poet's psychological point is to some extent granted it seems extreme: if so soon after the passing of a heightened emotional state one thinks of death as a result of its passing, one is not only exaggerating in this direction, but also about what sex might have achieved if it had been engaged in.

Thus sex, rejected as procreation, has a very dubious status if viewed as something that because of its intensity might combat time. Either it lowers one's estimation of

oneself by making one aware of one's 'corpse', and thus of death, or it could only serve as a drug frantically taken to lift one out of one's suffering but not really succeeding in making one oblivious of it. It is true that the speaker of 'The Just Statesman Dies' (p. 72) does, and after the passing of time, see his sexual experience as 'time not wasted . . . time well spent', but even then, of course, though the memory seems permanent, the moment is to be contrasted with time that *was* wasted, and it can be no more than a brief interruption from the general course.

The wish to escape from time can be viewed as Romantic, but, if so, it is also characteristically modern, and as I said at the outset, it appears to me that Mason is both of these things. Still, when one comes to reflect on the general despair of these poems, one must perhaps conclude that that is modern rather than belonging more strictly to nineteenth century Romanticism. The great English Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century were no longer supported by such firm traditional values as they themselves in part helped to demolish: for example, they were instrumental in making our view of the universe more man-centred. But Wordsworth nevertheless saw a divinity in nature, and Shelley believed in a timeless realm beyond our earth. Blake, who asserted that 'All deities reside in the human breast', might appear to be closer to Mason, but was very much more hopeful about man's position and future — perhaps because Mason does not have the same high opinion of man.

There is, in Mason, a typically modern *uncertainty* about man and God which, I feel sure, accounts to a large extent for his fear of the passing of time and his general anxiety.

As for man, Mason obviously hoped that man would succeed in creating a better world for himself, but in the poems man is more often shown to be evil, as those attacking Christ-figures are, or unable to do much against evil, as seems to be the case with the Christ-figures themselves. There seems to be little hope that children actually 'will dance through our land', and the poet is not prepared to leave behind him a son of his own who would live in a 'nettle-grown kingdom'.

God may not even exist, but if he does he evidently in Mason's view does not actively help man. Indeed it

rather appears to Mason that he must identify with what he seems to see as Christ's just complaint about God when on the cross:

Why have our gods abandoned us?
(*'Evolution'*, p. 55)

Seven, seven
Seven are the deadly wounds that call out against
heaven'.

(*'The Seventh Wound Protests'*, p. 107)

It must be difficult to accept the passing of time, and notably death, without feeling considerable confidence in either the present life or an existence after death. Mason, with little faith in either man or some supportive divinity, apparently lacked such confidence. To him, as to many in our age, the passing of time therefore posed a threat from which there was 'No Exit' except occasionally; but the possible solutions, and the dilemma itself, are explored and presented with extraordinary intensity, variety, and depth. Though of his time, the poet is not constricted within it. It is now some fifty years since most of these admirable poems were written, and it is beginning to be possible to agree with Mason's own feeling that his art, at least, will last; for surely, as he says in *'Flattering Unction'* (p. 61), his

... eternal fame
stands up too strong for Time to overthrow.

NOTES

¹ *Wayfarers'*, on p. 36 of R. A. K. Mason: *Collected Poems* (Christchurch, 1971). All references are to this edition.

² The point is worth stressing somewhat in view of the similarities with Shelley which J. E. Weir sees in *R. A. K. Mason* (Wellington, 1977). It is true that Mason admired Shelley, and it is possible that he was influenced by Shelley's self-pity (but on what indication?) or the Jupiter-Prometheus dichotomy in *Prometheus Unbound*. But even that dichotomy could also have been derived from Blake, and is likely to be in view of Blake's respect for a human Christ. Those comparing Weir's approach to Mason with mine will be struck by the fact that we differ greatly—much more so than I expected before reading his book. This, however, is in no way to suggest that Weir's work, or that of his predecessors, is not highly valuable. There is, for example, a useful account of several aspects of



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Mason's art in Charles Doyle's *R. A. K. Mason* (New York, 1970). Both authors refer to other discussions, e.g. a stimulating one by C. K. Stead in *Comment* 16 (July 1963), who on p. 34 stresses the importance of Time to Mason, but who, like other critics, largely confines the matter to that remark.

³ I discuss Mason's view of himself as Christ in an article, 'R. A. K. Mason: the Poet as a Pacific Christ', due to appear in a book to be published jointly by the East-West Centre (Hawaii) and the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English (Flinders, Adelaide).

⁴ Sonnet 65 in Peter Alexander, ed., *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works* (London and Glasgow, 1951; I quote from the 1966 impression). Shakespeare's faith in the strength of his art lies in the fact that it is, to him, more lasting than mortality, which in turn is more powerful than brass, stone, etc. At odd confident moments, as in 'Flattering Uncion' (p. 61), Mason can share such faith in the future and art, but generally contemplation of the past seems more re-assuring—even though *we* may point out that the past once was the future!

COURTNEY CARPENTER

You're never too old for trouble

Did you ever stare and reflect, in a moment of distraction, at someone you already know and are with? Winifred thought I was absorbed in my *euploea callithoe*, my prize catch of the season. And I was. I had a place reserved for him in the centre of the board, between *precis almana* and *hebomoia leucippe*. Together, the three would present a maze of lively colour, like a magnificent Oriental carpet. With a steel pin I impaled the little fellow. It was then, while fixing the label, that I glanced at Winifred. My glance became a stare and reflection. She was reading an author from the medieval past. But not too well. Her looks travelled from page to fireplace to page again, her thoughts slowly circling round and round.

'Does life have a purpose, Rosemary?' She didn't look at me. She looked from her book to the fire, pulling down the sleeves of her jersey.

For a while neither of us said anything. Often, it does

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